

(February 13, 2009) Chicago Tribune: Stimulus bill passes Congress

After clearing House, Senate, stimulus bill heads to Obama

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<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-stimulus-bill-passes-congress-090213,0,1745505.story>

WASHINGTON-After taking office last month, President Barack Obama called on Congress to pass a historic, massive economic stimulus bill in an effort to bolster the flagging economy. Following action earlier by the House, the Senate gave him what he wanted late Friday when senators voted 60-38 to pass the measure.

And, with a White House signing ceremony expected early next week, the test will begin on one of the biggest experiments in government economic policy since the days of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Great Depression—a \$787 billion attempt to create millions of jobs and pull the nation out of an increasingly dangerous financial crisis.

One major question is how soon will Americans start to feel the effects of the bill. The answer is that the measure will be felt immediately in some ways but not for months and even years in other ways.

Many people should see more money in their pockets soon, as a result of tax cuts designed to reduce withholding and fatten take-home pay. Investments in science, basic research and moving toward the so-called green economy may not provide sizable benefits for years.

The bill reflects a quick victory for Obama on his first big legislative initiative, thanks in large part to an unusually solid display of unity by congressional Democrats and a pragmatic willingness to sacrifice cherished provisions in order to win over the handful of Republican Senate votes needed to avoid a GOP filibuster and secure final passage.

At the same time, Obama failed to obtain the wide bipartisan support he had sought.

No Republicans voted for the bill in the House on Friday, and just three voted to back it as the Senate approved the measure. And while Democrats cheered and applauded Friday, Republican leaders denounced the bill as overstuffed, wasteful and unlikely to help revive the economy.

The Republicans' near-total opposition presages even harder fights to come on health-care reform, new aid to banks and other major issues on the president's agenda.

The bill was officially listed at \$787 billion Friday, \$2 billion less than the estimate from the day before.

In spending bills like this one, the Congressional Budget Office routinely refigures its estimates of the bill's overall cost

based on its analysis of the final language.

The bill provides billions of dollars for infrastructure repair, school renovations, aid for cash-strapped states and help for the unemployed in the form of health-care subsidies and extensions of unemployment benefits.

It also features a bevy of tax cuts designed to leave more money in the hands of businesses and individuals.

Republicans heaped particular criticism on House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). "It's a one-party bill," said Rep. Eric Cantor of Virginia, the Republican whip, after the bill passed in the House 246-183. "We weren't allowed to write one word of this bill."

Obama had met with leaders of both parties at the White House and in a trip to Capitol Hill, and he increased the share of the package devoted to tax cuts in an effort to lure GOP support. But many congressional Democrats were reluctant to make further concessions, and it appeared the GOP had made a strategic decision to stand fast against the bill.

No House Republicans supported it in earlier votes. And the same was true in the Senate, with the exception of Sens. Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins of Maine and Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, who gave Democrats the 60 votes needed earlier this week to end debate and cut off a filibuster.

During debate on the Senate floor, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) sounded the line many Democrats - including Obama - used to answer their critics. "What would they have us do?" he said. "They would have us do nothing.

"This president made direct overtures to bring in Republicans to try and find solutions to these problems-and they refused to do so," Durbin said.

Speaking on the House floor, Rep. David Obey (D-Wis.), the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, said the sweep of the policy change represented by the bill harked back to the 1930s. He said the bill's scale matched the economic dangers confronting the nation.

"I would suggest that this bill is big, all right. But I'll make you a deal," Obey said. "You show me a smaller problem that we have to confront, and I will be happy to produce a smaller bill."

Some House Democrats were unhappy the bill had been significantly scaled back in the Senate to mollify Collins, Snowe and Specter.

So tight was the margin in the Senate, however, that Sen. Sherrod Brown (D- Ohio) flew back to Washington Friday night on a military jet to cast the 60th vote.

Brown was attending a memorial service for his mother, and Democratic leaders kept the roll call open until he arrived late Friday.

To protest the cuts to the bill for transportation infrastructure repair, Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) voted "present" Friday, the only House member to do so.

"I didn't want to stand in the way of passing the stimulus bill," Lipinski said. "I did not want to embarrass President Obama, but I don't think Congress did Obama any favors in the way this bill was put together. I wanted to send the message that we needed to do more."